

E1-1971  
CD

**Minnesota Historical Society  
State Historic Preservation Office**  
345 Kellogg Boulevard West ♦ St. Paul, MN 55102-1906

**FAX TRANSMISSION**

DATE: 4/12/06

NUMBER OF PAGES INCLUDING COVER: 4

TO: Christine Dean

FAX NUMBER: 202-565-9000

FROM: Kelly Bragg Johnson

PHONE NUMBER: (657-296-5462)

**NOTES:**

Line is eligible under  
Criterion A  
see attachment

☐ Check here if original will follow by mail.

If you do not receive all pages, please contact: (651) 296-5434

**The Northern Pacific Railroad:  
The Brainerd Branch From Sauk Rapids to Brainerd  
1857-1896**



**Historic Context**

*Prepared by*

**Garneth O. Peterson, AICP, Senior Historian, URS/BRW, Inc.**

*Prepared in conjunction with  
S. P. No. 1809-55*

**BRW REPORT #01-05(A)**

*Submitted to the*  
**Minnesota Department of Transportation  
and the  
Federal Highway Administration  
March 2001**

#### 4. Conclusions

The Sauk Rapids to Brainerd section of railroad had impacts far beyond provision of service to central Minnesota. In describing the Northern Pacific, one historian noted that "few railroad enterprises have so consistently failed to comprehend their true interests" (Martin 1991:117). In the early 1870s, the Northern Pacific Railroad had the opportunity to control most of the railroad traffic of northern Minnesota when it held St. Paul and Pacific stock. But the NPRR management made several misjudgments. By viewing the St. Paul and Pacific as only a feeder to the Northern Pacific and failing to utilize the St. Paul and Pacific main line from the Red River Valley, the Northern Pacific forced all traffic to make a longer shipment to Duluth rather than St. Paul.

The Northern Pacific Railroad managers failed to recognize that increasingly more traffic came from St. Paul, and that the Twin Cities had become the major railroad terminal in the state. When the Panic of 1873 halted construction, the NPRR was left with an inconvenient connection to St. Paul. At the same time, the NPRR lost control of the St. Paul and Pacific as both railroad companies had financial problems. The financial setbacks provided an opportunity for other entrepreneurs to step in, and under James J. Hill, the St. Paul and Pacific ultimately became the Great Northern, the NPRR's greatest competitor.

Just as the failure to complete the branch was significant in NPRR history, its construction was also important. Once constructed, the segment provided the Northern Pacific with access to St. Paul, the hub of railroad connections. The NPRR began to compete for terminal and shipping facilities in the capital city, and ultimately its connection to St. Paul became the most valuable branch in the Northern Pacific system.

#### 5. Evaluation and Recommendation

The Brainerd branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad is significant in Minnesota railroad history because it provided a critical connection to St. Paul, the hub of railroad traffic in the late nineteenth century. The context period, 1857-1896, covers the years when the railroad corridor was first identified as a route until the time it was folded into the Northern Pacific Railway Company. The branch was significant before its construction, because the lack of an efficient connection to St. Paul left the Northern Pacific Railroad without access to markets at a critical time. The NPRR's misjudgment enabled the creation of James J. Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba as a competitor. Once the NPRR was able to control the Brainerd branch, it was significant as one of their most profitable lines and because it provided critical access to St. Paul, which became the NPRR's main terminal.

In regard to integrity of the railroad corridor, the combination of active rail lines and the right-of-way both clearly identify the route of the line. Use of the corridor as a recreational trail has preserved the railroad corridor as a location, even without the rails on the northern segment. The gap in the corridor at the Brainerd bypass is not extensive enough to seriously damage the integrity of the corridor as a transportation route.

It is the recommendation of this study that the Brainerd Branch of the Northern Pacific Railway Company is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, for its association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

If the State Historic Preservation Office concurs with the recommendation of eligibility, the proposed upgrade to TH 371 will have an adverse effect upon the northern portion of the railroad corridor. The northbound lanes of the proposed upgrade are planned for construction on the railroad right-of-way (currently a recreational trail). Any adverse effects from the proposed upgrade will be determined and mitigated in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the SHPO and Mn/DOT.